

Climate Change Policy Toppled Australia's Leader. Here's What It Means for Others.

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Highlight: Climate change can be a potent political issue in countries with powerful fossil fuel lobbies, namely Australia, Canada and the United States.

Body

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Climate change policy toppled the government in Australia on Friday.

How much does that really matter?

It is certain to keep Australia from meeting its emissions targets under the Paris climate agreement.

It's also a glimpse into what a potent political issue climate change and energy policy can be in a handful of countries with powerful fossil fuel lobbies, namely Australia, Canada and the United States.

In Australia, the world's largest exporter of coal, climate and energy policy have infused politics for a decade, helping to bring down both liberal and conservative lawmakers.

This week, the failure to pass legislation that would have reined in greenhouse gas emissions precipitated Malcolm Turnbull's ouster as prime minister. He was elbowed out by Scott Morrison, an ardent champion of the Australian coal industry who is known for having brought a lump of the stuff to Parliament.

It could be a bellwether for next year's Canadian elections, expected in October, in which Prime Minister Justin Trudeau faces a powerful challenge from politicians aligned with the country's oil industry. Conservatives have pledged to undo Mr. Trudeau's plans to put a price on carbon nationwide if they take power. At the provincial level, conservatives won a majority in Ontario after campaigning against the province's newly enacted cap-and-trade program.

The Australian parallels with the United States are striking. The Trump administration has promised to revive the coal industry, rolled back fuel emissions standards and announced the country's exit from the Paris pact altogether. Climate change is not a driving issue in the United States midterm election campaign, though it is for liberal Democrats, a recent study by the Yale Program on Climate Change Communication has shown.

Environmental policy and global warming are top priorities for those who describe themselves as liberal Democrats, the study found, after health care and gun control.

Democrats in Congress suffered sweeping losses in the 2010 midterms after trying and failing to pass a cap-and-trade program for carbon dioxide emissions. A few studies by political scientists have suggested that the cap-and-

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trade votes may have hurt some incumbents who voted for the measure, though economic factors and the health care debate played a large role.

Robert C. Orr, dean of the School of Public Policy at the University of Maryland, pointed to another parallel: In both Australia and the United States, local leaders have embraced renewable energy even as national politicians promote fossil fuels.

"Australia is a lot like the U.S.," said Dr. Orr, who is also the special adviser on climate change to the United Nations secretary general. "Climate policy has really been driven from below, from the state, local and business level. That is not going to change."

Most Australian states have renewable energy targets, and Australians are powering their houses with solar energy at one of the highest rates in the world. But Australia's emissions have continued to rise.

Australia is among several industrialized nations that are not on track to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to keep global warming below two degrees Celsius as the Paris accord promises, according to independent analyses.

Climate Action Tracker, an alliance of European think tanks that tracks countries' climate pledges under the agreement, concluded recently that "if all other countries were to follow Australia's current policy settings, warming could reach over 3°C and up to 4°C." Those are levels that climate scientists consider "highly insufficient" to stop the worst effects of climate change.

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Brad Plumer contributed reporting from Washington.

PHOTO: The departing prime minister, Malcolm Turnbull, delivering his farewell address on Friday. (PHOTOGRAPH BY Sam Mooy/EPA, via Shutterstock FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES)

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